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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000178

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SUBJECT: SAMI AL-ASKERI DESCRIBES JANUARY 19 ATTACK ON NSA
RUBAIE

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: PM Advisor Sami al-Askeri described scrambling to reach out to Sadr/JAM contacts and organize a GOI response to an apparent JAM attack on a mosque where National Security Advisor Muwafaq al-Rubaie was attending Ashoura services Saturday evening. As Rubaie remained holed up in the mosque, Sadr leaders first denied responsibility then offered safe passage under JAM escort. When ISF units were slow to respond, PM Maliki sent al-Askeri, MinInt Bolani, and his own PSD team to extricate Rubaie amidst gunmen and demonstrators outside the mosque compound. The mosque siege, along with a recent statement (which came prior to the incident) by a Sadr spokesman, have raised some concerns about the fragility of the Sadr freeze, which has had a significant effect in reducing violence. The GOI remains reasonably confident that the freeze will hold for now, though ISCI/Badr conflicts with Sadrists in the south remain a source of tension and could eventually trigger an end to the freeze. End Summary.

¶2. (S) In a 20 January conversation with State and MNF-I co-directors of the Force Strategic Engagement Cell (FSEC), PM Advisor and CoR member Sami al-Askeri gave a first-hand account of the GOI response to the apparent JAM attack on a Baghdad mosque where National Security Advisor Muwafaq al-Rubaie was attending Ashoura services. The 19 January incident, coupled with a recent statement by Sadr spokesman Salah al-Obeidi, has generated concern about the fragility of the JAM freeze among some Iraqi observers, as well as some amusement at the predicament of the unpopular al-Rubaie.

¶3. (S) A close Maliki confidante, al-Askeri among other things plays a key role in handling Maliki's relations with the Sadr movement. He said he was with the PM and Interior Minister Bolani on the evening of January 19, preparing to begin the main Ashoura prayer service, when they received a call from al-Rubaie saying he was under fire and holed up in a mosque in Baghdad's Shuala neighborhood, a JAM stronghold. By Rubaie's account, JAM had surrounded the mosque, disarmed his bodyguards, and shot out the tires on his vehicles (another source told us the attackers further humiliated Rubaie's guards by forcing them to strip). Rubaie and the mosque Imam had retreated to the mosque's inner sanctuary as shots began coming through the windows.

¶4. (S) Al-Askeri said he immediately called Baghdad Operations Center chief LTG Abud and Baghdad Police chief MG Kazim, asking them to get units to the mosque. He then started calling "all my Sadrists contacts," asking them "what happened to the freeze." His contacts, among them Sadr office Political Committee Chair Luay Sumaysim and former Sadr City "mayor" Rahim al-Daraji, assured him the attack was not being carried out by Sadr militias. Al-Askeri put them in direct contact with Rubaie in the mosque. Meanwhile, as Rubaie later recounted, a group 3-4 JAM leaders had entered the mosque and one of them handed him a phone saying it was Moqtada himself. Rubaie remained skeptical that he was

actually talking to Muqtada, but the caller offered him safe passage out of the mosque under escort by the gunmen. Rubaie, concerned that it was a trap, refused the offer.

15. (S) Meanwhile, PM Maliki was uneasy about the ISF response, and asked al-Askeri, and MOI Bolani to take the PM,s own bodyguards and car to extricate Rubaie. They loaded up and made the short drive to the Shuala neighborhood, arriving to a chaotic scene. The local police were disengaged, standing blocks away from the mosque. ISF units were not to be seen. By the time they arrived, the shooting had paused, and "groups of teenagers" were hurling stones at the mosque entrance. There were also what appeared to be plainclothes militia members walking the perimeter of the compound.

16. (S) The PM,s PSD team was able to extricate Rubaie into an armored SUV and depart the scene, though Rubaie claims a shot was fired into the SUV,s rear window as the vehicle pulled out. Rubaie, understandably angry, fully blames JAM for what he believes was a premeditated kidnapping attempt. He later told GEN Petraeus he is "ready to declare war on JAM."

17. (S) Al-Askeri was equally unconvinced by Sadrists denials, but more circumspect in his response. He said he continues to have concerns about Muqtada,s "unpredictability," as well as his spotty control over his own organization. He said Muqtada lacks a steady hand among his advisors who can steer his decision making. He noted efforts underway among some Sadrists leaders to create alternate political leaderships, though these are still at a formative stage.

18. (S) Despite these concerns, al-Askeri is reasonably

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confident that the freeze will hold for the time being. He said Badr-JAM tensions in the south continue to be the main irritant in GOI-Sadrists relations. The PM continues his efforts to rein in what al-Askeri called "Badr extremists" who command some ISF units in the south, and engage in what Al-Askeri sees as unnecessarily provocative actions against Sadrists there. These tensions were behind the recent statement by Sadr spokesman Salah al-Obeidi threatening to lift the freeze. Al-Askeri noted that the PM could only go so far in controlling ISCI/Badr, given the political realities he faces, but said he remains fully engaged on these issues. (Note: MNF-I conversations with Sadrists CoR member Baha al-Arraji on 21 January also indicate the JAM freeze will stay in effect.)

19. (S) Comment: al-Askari is the closest of Maliki's advisors to the Sadrists if not JAM. His concerns, and his willingness to share them with us, may represent a growing sense within the Prime Minister's circle of the dangers posed by elements within the Sadr trend.
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